

## The Path Master

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the whiskey bottle! Quick! What? Money to pay? Trot out that grog or I'll shoot your lamps out!"

"He's been a-drinkin' again," whispered the game-warden. "Fur God's said, give him that bottle, somebody!"

But as the bottle was pushed across the counter, McCloud swung his rifle-butt and knocked the bottle into slivers. "Drinks for the crowd!" he said, with an ugly laugh. "Get down and lap it up off the floor, you fox cubs!"

Then, pushing the fly-screen door open with one elbow, he sauntered out into the moonlight, careless who might follow him, although now that he had insulted and defied the entire town there were men behind who would have done him a mischief if they had dared believe him off his guard.

He walked moodily on in the moonlight, disdaining to either listen or glance behind him. There was a stoop to his shoulders now, a loose carriage which sometimes marks a man whose last shred of self-respect has gone, leaving him nothing but the naked virtues and vices with which he was born. McCloud's vices were many, though some of them lay dormant; his virtues, if they were virtues, could be counted in a breath—a natural courage, and a generous heart, paralyzed and inactive under a load of despair and deep resentment against everybody and everything. He hated the fortunate and the unfortunate alike; he despised his neighbors, he despised himself. His inertia had given place to a fierce restlessness; he felt a sudden and curious desire for a physical struggle with a strong antagonist—like young Byram.

All at once the misery of his poverty arose up before him. It was not unendurable simply because he was obliged to endure it.

The thought of his hopeless poverty stupefied him at first, then rage followed. Poverty was an antagonist, like young Byram—a powerful one. How he hated it! How he hated Byram! Why? And, as he walked there, shuffling up the dust in the moonlight, he thought, for the first time in his life, that if poverty were only a breathing creature he would strangle it with his naked hands. But logic carried him no further; he began to brood again, remembering Tansey's insults and the white anger of young Byram, and the threats from the dim group around the stove. If they molested him they would remember it. He would neither pay taxes nor work for them.

Then he thought of the path-master, reddening as he remembered Tansey's accusation. He shrugged his shoulders and straightened up, dismissing her from his mind, but she returned, only to be again dismissed with an effort.

When for the third time the memory of the little path-master returned, he glanced up as though he could see her in the flesh standing in the road before his house. She was there—in the flesh.

The moonlight silvered her hair, and her face was the face of a spirit; it quickened the sluggish blood in his veins to see her so in the moonlight.

She said: "I thought that if you knew I should be obliged to pay your road-tax if you do not, you would pay. Would you?"

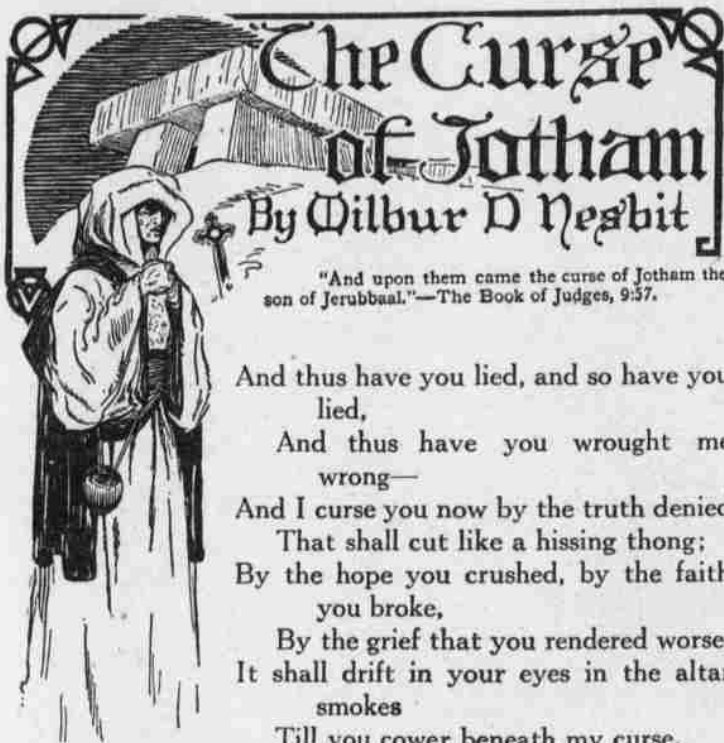
A shadow glided across the moonlight; it was the collie dog, and it came and looked up into McCloud's shadowy eyes.

"Yes—I would," he said; "but I cannot."

His heart began to beat faster; a tide of wholesome blood stirred and flowed through his veins. It was the latent decency within him awaking.

"Little path-master," he said, "I am very poor; I have no money. But I will work out my taxes because you ask me."

He raised his head and looked at the spectral forest where dead pines towered, ghastly in the moon's beams. That morning he had cut the last wood on his own land; he had nothing left to



And thus have you lied, and so have you lied,  
And thus have you wrought me wrong—  
And I curse you now by the truth denied  
That shall cut like a hissing thong;  
By the hope you crushed, by the faith  
you broke,  
By the grief that you rendered worse,  
It shall drift in your eyes in the altar  
smokes  
Till you cower beneath my curse.

I have dreamed of this in the darkened days  
And brooded in wrath at night,  
I have fought with your lies in the gloomy ways  
When wrestling to gain my right;  
With a curse that is keen as a serpent's tooth  
I swear you shall bend to me—  
As deathless and great as the sleepless truth  
This curse that I make shall be.

Though a man go down to the house of death  
Revenge is a living thing  
That will pulse its way as an outblown breath  
Where the stars in their courses swing,  
That will follow far past the dying suns  
Through the orbits devised of old  
Till it reach the place of the faithless ones  
Where the planets have long grown cold.

And thus have you lied, and so have you lied—  
My spirit can bide and wait  
With the faith you broke and the truth denied  
Till it find you before the gate.  
And there in the glow of a light sublime  
In a vast, eternal place  
I shall tear all the truth from the page of  
time  
And shall fling it against your face.



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sell but a patch of brambles and a hut which no one would buy.

"I guess I'm no good," he said; "I can't work."

"But what will you do?" she asked, with pitiful eyes raised.

"Do? Oh, what I have done. I can shoot partridges."

"Market-shooting is against the law," she said, faintly.

"The law!" he repeated; "it seems to me there is nothing but law in this God-forsaken hole!"

"Can't you live within the law? It is not difficult, is it?" she asked.

"It is difficult for me," he said, sullenly. The dogged brute in him was awaking in its turn. He was already sorry he had promised her to work out his taxes. Then he remembered the penalty. Clearly he would have to work, or she would be held responsible.

"If anybody would take an unskilled man," he began, "I—I would try to get something to do."

"Won't they?"

"No. I tried it—once."

"Only once?"

He gave a short laugh and stooped to pat the collie, saying, "Don't bother me, little path-master."

"No—I won't," she replied, slowly.

She went away in the moonlight, saying good-night and calling her collie, and he walked up the slope to the house, curiously at peace with himself and the dim world hidden in the shadows around.

He was not sleepy. As he had no candles, he sat down in the moonlight, idly balancing his rifle on his knees. From force of habit he loaded it, then rubbed the stock with the palm of his hand, eyes dreaming.

Into the tangled garden a whip-poorwill flashed on noiseless wings, rested a moment, unseen, then broke out into husky, breathless calling. A minute later the whispering call came from the forest's edge, then farther away, almost inaudible in the thickening dusk.

And, as he sat there, thinking of the little path-master, he became aware of a man slinking along the moon-lit road below. His heart stopped, then the pulses went bounding, and his fingers closed on his rifle.

There were other men in the moonlight now—he counted five—and he called out to them, demanding their business.

"You're our business," shouted back young Byram. "Git up an' dust out o' Foxville, you dirty loafer!"

"Better stay where you are," said McCloud, grimly.

Then old Tansey bawled: "Yew low cuss, git outta this here town! Yew air meaner 'n pussley an' meaner 'n quack-root, an' we air bound tew run yew into them mountings, b' gosh!"

There was a silence, then the same voice: "Be yew calculatin' tew mosey, Dan McCloud?"

"You had better stay where you are," said McCloud; "I'm armed." "Ye be?" replied a new voice; "then come aout o' that or we'll snake ye aout!"

Byram began moving towards the house, shot-gun raised.

"Stop!" cried McCloud, jumping to his feet.

But Byram came on, gun levelled, and McCloud retreated to his front door.

"Git it to him!" shouted the game-warden; "shoot his windows out!" There was a flash from the road and a load of buckshot crashed through the window overhead.

Before the echoes of the report died away, McCloud's voice was heard again, calmly warning them back.

Something in his voice arrested the general advance.

"I don't know why I don't kill you in your tracks, Byram," said McCloud; "I've wanted the excuse often enough. But now I've got it and I don't want it, somehow. Let me alone, I tell you."

"He's no good!" said the warden, distinctly. Byram crept through the

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